

1997 ADDRESS BY STEVE GAW SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

For the 89th time in its great history, the citizens of the state of Missouri have instructed their elected representatives to meet and consider changes in the laws governing this state.

I thank my colleagues in the Missouri House for the honor you have given me today. I appreciate your confidence and hold sacred your trust.

I have one other person I would like to thank today. As all of you know, the past year has brought many new demands and sacrifices to my personal and professional life. Despite all the changes and the new challenges, there is nothing more important to me than the woman I share my life with. Please join me in saying thank you to my wife, Fannie.

I also extend my congratulations to those who have been selected to return to this glorious chamber, and my special congratulations to those who are serving in this chamber for the first time. I ask all members who have been elected for their first full term to stand up and receive our congratulations.

I asked for all of you to stand for two reasons. First, to honor you for your commitment to this state. And secondly, because that may be the only opportunity you have to be applauded for something that you do here.

In all seriousness, the tasks we have before us, like our commitment to them, are great. Eighteen weeks from Friday, we will adjourn and history will be the judge of our efforts.

Our body, the Missouri House of Representatives, is constantly judged by the people we serve. When voters went to the polls in November, they reelected all current statewide officials and left the political makeup of this body essentially the same. This indicates, to me, the public is generally satisfied with the direction this state has been headed for the last four years.

Consider where this state is at this point of time in history. Our state economy is strong, our tax rate is 49th in the nation, and our unemployment rate is low. We are one of the few states with a Triple-A bond rating and we have been recognized as the third-best fiscally-managed state in the country.

More criminals are being prosecuted and they are being punished with some of the toughest sentencing laws in the country. And for sexual predators, there is no place to hide in the state of Missouri.

We are noticing marked improvements in our education system as well. Learning has been enhanced with reduced class sizes, educators have better access to new technology and grants are now available for increased security in our schools. Our students are receiving a better education and we have given the public important tools to monitor the success of their local schools.

The quality of health care in this state is improving, with important advances in childhood immunizations, and longer maternity stays for new mothers.

The outlook for Missouri business is strong. During the last four years:

- more than 300,000 new jobs have been created;
- our efforts to reduce the costs of workers' compensation insurance has had a positive and dramatic effect on those rates;
- and our export business continues to grow as current markets are demanding more of our goods and new markets are opening up to us.

Hundreds of new businesses are now calling Missouri home, and hundreds of existing business have expanded.

Now, our task is to build on this record of accomplishment. In doing so, let us see not just the path at our feet, but to the horizon to which it leads.

This year we will face issues that will take much of our attention.....complicated issues such as additional welfare reform, managed health care, and tax increment financing. We will have an opportunity to eliminate the general sales tax on food and make college and technical training more affordable.

But the real test for our success must be in the results we produce----for Missouri's families, and most importantly, for the future of Missouri's children.

While we have come far in four years we have farther yet to go.

Listen to some of the statistics from the 1996 annual KIDS COUNT report, compiled by the Citizens for Missouri's Children.

- Our infant mortality rate, while decreasing, is still too high, since of every 1,000 children born in Missouri, eight are expected to die in infancy.
- More than 28,000 Missouri children are born with low birth weights.
- In 1995, 280 teenagers in Missouri died a violent death, a 16 percent increase over 1994.
- Nearly 34,000 teenagers dropped out of school in the 1993-94 school year. Estimates by education officials say about one out of every four freshmen students this year will drop out by the year 2000.

While this news is disturbing enough, the report states that rates for minority children in most of these categories are two to three times higher than those for Caucasian children. The Department of Corrections say that about 36 percent of inmates entering our system are functionally illiterate and around 45 percent do not have a high school diploma.

We need to carefully analyze this and other information and determine how to make this a better state for children to live in.

There should be little doubt that eliminating the general sales tax on food will have a positive impact on the lives of working Missouri families. This, simply, is an issue of fairness.

The current tax refund system of returning money collected over the Hancock Amendment lid rewards the wealthiest Missourians who pay income taxes. The working men and women of Missouri who put food on the table and pay sales, property and other taxes, deserve the direct benefits of this sales tax reduction.

Investment also needs to be made this session in the future of Missouri students wishing to go to college. The governor's proposal to issue tax credits up to \$1,500 per year for the first two years of post-secondary education will greatly assist students whose only obstacle to higher learning is a financial one.

The measure also allows adults who need to go back to be retrained when old skills are no longer marketable. Such investment produces positive long-term results for the individuals and for the state. The wisdom of such investments should be obvious.

But some of our long-term challenges this year will come from reform in welfare. The positive results of the welfare reforms approved by this body two years ago are evident---moving 43,000 individuals from welfare to work. With proposed additional adjustments to Missouri's laws on child support enforcement -- parents, not the state -- will bear a larger responsibility.

But we must take care this year to avoid the pitfalls of short-term success at the price of long-term failure. Numbers of individuals moving from welfare to work should not alone provide the measure for our success.

We should consider other things as well---and central among them should be our children and their future.

Where will we be in 15 years if children of single mothers going into the workforce have no stable day care?

Where will we be on children's health if children go uncovered because we have not bridged the insurance gap that exists between the Medicaid-covered welfare recipients and the uncovered children of many of the working poor?

Where will we be on employment opportunities for young men and women in our inner cities and rural areas?

I think the question that should be asked when we examine legislation this session is where will we be as a result of our actions in five, 10, 15 years?

Will we produce more high school dropouts in prison or more graduates at work?

Will we lower the number of our low birth weight babies, saving lives and millions of dollars of health care costs?

Will we lower the number of births to single teen mothers?

Will we decrease the number of violent juvenile deaths?

Will we create support systems for children without traditional family support in day care and community?

Will we invest in our children's future with the zest that we now spend on building walls to protect us from the failures of our past?

It is time for us to take our eyes off our feet and put them on the horizon. Let us set goals that establish standards to measure our state's and communities' success.

Let us all work together with the enthusiasm generated from knowing we are not lost in the wilderness, but are headed in the right direction.

We can look back with the perfect vision of hindsight over the last four years knowing that we have made progress. Let us move forward striving for a similar vision of the future for everyone in Missouri, but mainly for our children.

Thank you.